



The Drowned Muse: Casting the Unknown Woman Across the Tides of Modernity (Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs)

Anne-Gaëlle Saliot

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The Drowned Muse is a study of the extraordinary destiny, in the history of European culture, of an object which could seem, at first glance, quite ordinary in the history of European culture. It tells the story of a mask, the cast of a young girl's face entitled "L'Inconnue de la Seine" (the Unknown Woman of the Seine), and its subsequent metamorphoses as a cultural figure. Legend has it that the "Inconnue" drowned herself in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. The forensic scientist tending to her unidentified corpse at the Paris Morgue was supposedly so struck by her allure that he captured in plaster the contours of her face. This unknown girl, also called "The Mona Lisa of Suicide," has since become the object of an obsessive interest that started in the late 1890s, reached its peak in the 1930s, and continues to reverberate today.

Aby Warburg defines art history as "a ghost story for grown-ups." This study is similarly "a ghost story for grown-ups," narrating the aura of a cultural object that crosses temporal, geographical, and linguistic frontiers. It views the "Inconnue" as a symptomatic expression of a modern world haunted by the earlier modernity of the nineteenth century. It also investigates how the mask's metamorphoses reflect major shifts in the cultural history of the last two centuries, approaching the "Inconnue" as an entry point to understand a phenomenon characteristic of 20th- and 21st-century modernity: the translatability of media. Doing so, this study mobilizes discourses surrounding the "Inconnue," casting them as points of negotiation through which we may consider the modern age.

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